



## Muslim travellers' needs: What don't we know?



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 29 July 2016

Received in revised form 10 August 2016

Accepted 13 August 2016

Available online xxxx

#### Keywords:

Muslim travellers' needs

CMM theory

Cultural norms

Interaction

Well-being

Segregation

### ABSTRACT

Halal tourism, a term widely used as a synonym for Muslim travel, refers to products, leisure, recreation and social purposes that comply with Islamic teaching. This study considers the needs of this increasingly large travel market. Existing studies repeatedly emphasise the needs for Halal food, Halal restaurants, religious practices, and Halal compliant accommodation, tours, and destinations. By contrasting existing studies with the key cultural facets of interaction and communication derived from the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory, the researchers found the need to better identify Muslim travellers' needs from the Culture norms, Verbal and non-verbal communication, Life Scripting, and Relationships domains. Proposed studies include understanding the role of travel for individual well-being in Islamic life, identifying the specifics of verbal and non-verbal interaction with Muslim tourists, investigating the management of the segregation of the sexes in public recreational areas, and supporting Islamic religious and cultural events.

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### 1. Introduction

Muslim travel is a fast-growing market. The challenge in working with this market is have we understood the important needs of Muslim tourists? Answering this challenge drives the present study. A theoretically informed approach to studying this significant market is introduced. The approach is consistent with the recent work of Ryan (2016) who suggests that new work on this topic needs to pursue more sophisticated forms of analysis. The coordinated management of meaning theory to understand cross cultural encounters in tourism is discussed and employed to test the compass of concerns identified in the existing studies. Using this approach, the study seeks to alert those who interact with Muslim travellers to a potentially larger range of needs and issues than has previously been captured by atheoretical and descriptive work. Throughout this paper, the term Halal tourism will be used as a synonym for Muslim travel. It refers to products, leisure, recreation and social purposes that comply with Islamic teaching (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Bon & Hussain, 2010; El-Gohary, 2016; Mohsin, Ramli, & Alkhulayfi, 2016; Mayock, 2015; Ryan, 2016).

In the contemporary world, the practice of the religion of Islam is moderated by the specific political and national policies which require varied adherence to interpretations of the Qur'an. This is not a trivial force for the lives of the citizens and those who travel, since failure to observe the national regulations both at home and abroad can result in severe punishments. Broadly, Muslims in South East Asian countries have fewer restrictions on their public life than those from Middle Eastern nations (Scott & Jafari, 2010). Both in their visible dress styles and in their less visible conceptions of the right way to behave, citizens from the affluent source markets, for example Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, may require their needs as Muslims to be met more directly than those from the more populous but less affluent markets of Malaysia and Indonesia (Sheridan, 1999: 82–109). While recognising the power of these national differences in studying Muslim tourists, the commonalities of the faith do permit uniform tourists' needs across Islamic countries to be studied and identified. The present study considers Muslim travel beyond the specific activity of pilgrimage, which is a notable but not all encompassing component of Halal tourism.

The size and scale of the Muslim travel market can be readily documented by a number of impressive statistics. It is estimated that the Muslim population will grow to 2.8 billion or 30% of the world's population by 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2015; Scott & Jafari, 2010). Most Muslims (60%) live in Asia and 20% live in the Middle East and North Africa. The outbound receipts from Muslim travellers amounted to US\$ 140 billion (11.6% of the global market) in 2013. This number surpassed

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the United States and China markets which generated US\$131.3 billion and US\$121.8 billion respectively in the same year (Mayock, 2015). It is projected that Muslim travellers will reach 150 million and spend approximately US\$238 billion by 2020 (Liau, 2016; MasterCard & CrescentRating, 2015; Mayock, 2015; The Business Year, 2016). The existing and projected statistics confirm the point that Muslim travellers are a group of significance and deserve extensive research in tourism and hospitality studies. It can be argued, however, that studies on Muslim tourism are limited (Kim, Im, & King, 2015), and mostly only discuss the features of Muslim behaviour which comply directly with the teachings of the Qur'an (Ryan, 2016).

Both OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) destinations and non-OIC locations have shown a desire to attract more Muslim tourists. The Global Muslim Travel Index 2015, issued by MasterCard and CrescentRating (2015), listed the leading destinations from 29 OIC destinations and 81 non-OIC destinations. The top ten OIC destinations include Malaysia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Indonesia, Oman, Jordan, Morocco, and Brunei. The top ten non-OIC destinations are Singapore, Thailand, United Kingdom, South Africa, France, Belgium, Hong Kong, USA, Spain, and Taiwan. Other non-OIC countries such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and China have also developed Halal tourism for Muslim travellers. Some destinations such as New Zealand, are also promoting themselves to Halal tourists, but research by Razzaq, Hall, and Prayag (2016) indicates that further understanding and accommodation product changes are needed to suit the potential market.

Already, there are tourism websites and guidelines for Halal tourism in a range of countries including the newly interested competitors such as China ([tour-beijing.com](http://tour-beijing.com)), Australia (the Muslim Visitor Guide) and Japan (Welcome Guide to the Muslim Visitor). Japan, in particular, is heavily promoting Halal tourism to attract visitors from the Islamic countries by organising a Halal Expo and providing Halal foods in hotels, restaurants, and airlines, prayer rooms in major airports and accommodation settings, and even Japanese silk hijab in the shops (Mohsin et al., 2016; NY Daily News, 2014). The growth of Halal tourism is also evidenced by the rise of online booking portals that offer Halal tours such as [halaltrips.com](http://halaltrips.com) and [halalbookings.com](http://halalbookings.com) (Mohsin et al., 2016).

The puzzle which exists in furthering researching about this market is what elements or features of being Muslim and hence what tourists' needs are overlooked in the research literature? The presumptions being made in posing this question are that there are some Muslim tourists' needs which have been neglected and also that they can be identified by analysing the issue with a comprehensive theoretical system embracing multiple aspect of cross-cultural communication.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Islam and Halal tourism

The core concept of Islam concerns the balance between material and spiritual needs. A sound balance leads to individual well-being and a good life. (Mohsin et al., 2016). In the Qur'an, travel is regarded as advantageous for socialisation (e.g. visiting friends and relatives), the enhancement of health and well-being, the acquisition of new knowledge, and for appreciating the magnificence of God's creations. Travel thus serves as an activity to help balance physical and spiritual states. The ideas are apparent in the various chapters of the Qur'an such as Al-Ankabot verse 20, Al-Imran: 137 and Hajj verse 46 (Henderson, 2003; Mohsin et al., 2016; Zamani-Farahani & Eid, 2016). As Muslims adhere to the Qur'an and the hadith (related texts/verses) as the basis of law and actions in their daily life, travelling and destination choice are also influenced by the Islamic teaching (Mohsin et al., 2016; Scott & Jafari, 2010). The concept of Halal defines approved behaviours that adhere to the Sharia law (Islamic teaching) (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Mohsin et al., 2016). These perspectives are of special significance to Muslims when travelling.

Halal tourism, as proposed by Battour and Ismail (2016), indicates "any tourism object or action which is permissible according to the Islamic teachings to use or engage by Muslims in the tourism industry" (p. 2). The dominant work to date suggests that destinations striving to attract Muslim tourists should attend to multiple aspects of the Halal lifestyle which includes food (Halal restaurants), accommodation preferences (Halal hotels/Halal resorts), transportation practices (Halal trips), fashion, shopping, finance, and medical needs (Battour & Ismail, 2016; El-Gohary, 2016; Mayock, 2015). The present study uses the existing literature as one systematic source of data to build a file of the issues which have already been identified about Halal tourism.

As an example of the prevailing practices and interests in Halal tourism, Malaysia is the leading Halal destination and has attracted 5.6 million Muslim tourists or around 20% of the country's total visitors in 2014. Malaysia not only promotes Halal hotels and restaurants, but also offers easy access to prayer facilities in public areas, Halal hospitals and medication, Islamic tourism attractions, buildings, and events (The Business Year, 2016). Malaysia is also the second ranked shopping destination for Muslim tourists after Dubai (Retail Redaction, 2015).

The literature also identifies small items which can be significant in hosting Muslim tourists. For example, Halal friendly hotel rooms equipped with Qiblah signs (those pointing to Mecca), prayer mats, toilet amenities free from alcohol and animal fats and a basin for the ritual washing needed prior to praying, are all desired facilities that serve the guests and respect their culture and religion. Such hotels nowadays can be found in Europe as well as in OIC countries (e.g. Eurostar Hotel in Moscow, JW Marriott Grosvenor House in London, and the Tschuggen Grand Hotel in Switzerland) (Ramakrishnan, 2015). It is reported that Halal hotels and restaurants in Japan provide a vegetarian menu and/or seafood dishes, non-pork and non-lard meals, non-alcoholic drinks, and prayer rooms (Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2015).

A study conducted by Premium Europe (2016) noted the top ten hotel features that would cater for Muslim guests, in particular for those from the Middle Eastern countries. They include (in order of importance): Halal food, prayer facilities (e.g. praying mat and Qiblah direction), female swimming/spa/bathing time, female housekeeping, separate spa/pool/beach facilities, a Middle Eastern menu, alcohol free mini-bars or bars, Arabic TV channels, bathing suits for female guests, and the availability of the Qur'an in the rooms. Additionally, it can be noted that airlines that cater to Muslim travellers should observe the Islamic ways of life, such as to serve only Halal foods and non-alcoholic beverages. Further, Muslim female cabin crew should be required to wear a uniform with a headscarf to cover their heads. Several airlines that have this view include Rayani Air, Iran Air, Royal Brunei Airline, and Saudi Arabia Airline (Liau, 2016).

It is important for hospitality and travel providers that offer accommodation, food and beverages to obtain Halal certification. Such certification can be issued by select organisations and local government agencies to appeal to the Muslim market segments. Some examples of the certifying organisations or government bodies include Halal Australia, Inc., Australian Halal Authority & Advisers, Halal India, the Institute for Food, Drugs and Cosmetics Indonesian Ulema Council (LPPOM MUI), Department of Islamic Malaysia (JAKIM), Singapore Religious Council (MUIS), Taiwan Halal Integrity Development Association (THIDA), Central Islamic Committee of Thailand, Islamic Services of America, and Turkey's Association for the Inspection and Certification of Food and Supplies (GIMDES) (Mohsin et al., 2016).

### 2.2. Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory

In an attempt to advance the study of Halal tourism, it can be proposed that a comprehensive recognition of the tourists' concerns is required. The approach taken in this study is to attempt to build this comprehensive recognition by considering insights from a more theoretical perspective than that adopted in most of the existing studies. The role of theory in tourism study is often contested with a variety of

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